

# Indian Rose Annual - IRA 1998

## Is *R. clinophylla* the Lotus of the Rose World?

M.S. Viraraghavan

Those of you who had read Dr. N.C. Sen's interesting article on how he grows *R. clinophylla* (*R. involucrata*) in Asansol in West Bengal (in Indian Rose Annual XI, 1993) would have noted the fascinating and curious observation he makes quoting the eminent horticulturist, Shivaprasad Bannerjee. Bannerjee says that he searched for this rose species which used to grow in the lowlands of Bengal like *the lotus* in the past, and he finally collected a specimen in the early 1960's in Uddaranpur village of Murshidabad District of West Bengal on an island off the bank of the River Padma, one of the smaller rivers which takes off from the main River Ganges.

In the same article it is mentioned how Bannerjee found a specimen 'partially drowned in the inundated island'. Material propagated from Bannerjee's original plant has been successfully cultivated by Dr. Sen in Asansol under normal garden conditions.

In January 1991 I had collected the other prominent species of Eastern India, *R. gigantea*, on the lower slopes of Mount Sirohi near Ukhrul, a small town situated some 30 miles uphill from Imphal, the capital of Manipur State. My experiences are described in Indian Rose Annual XIII, 1995 and in a series of articles in Rose News in 1991.

In this background it is of great interest to reproduce below copies of some original correspondence dating to 1888 between Mr. David Prain,

the Curator of the Calcutta Botanical Gardens at Sibpur and the noted Belgian botanist, M. Crépin, Director of the State Botanical Gardens at Brussels. These papers are reproduced courtesy of Mr. Ivan Louette of Belgium who patiently searched the archives of the Herbarium in Brussels to trace these letters.

Royal Botanic Garden

Seebpore

Near Calcutta

June 2 1888

M. Crépin  
Director du  
Jardin Botanique de l'Etat  
Bruxelles

Dear Sir,

*I ought to apologize for not sooner answering your very kind letter of 12th March. We have here in Calcutta long known M. Crépin by reputation and I am very highly honoured to now know you by correspondence. I am very much obliged indeed for your publication which I have received in safety.*

*I am not able to tell you much about R. involucrata. It was just beginning to flower when I wrote to you last and it continued to bear flowers till the first week of April. Since then it has ceased to flower and all its leaves have fallen. It now (just at the end of the hot season and as we are expecting the arrival of the rains) stands bare of leaves and flowers. I shall let you know later on when the leaves appear and the other incidents*

*of its annual cycle as they occur. I have made a collection of good flowers for you but I do not send them yet as no good fruit formed after their flowering.*

*You ask if R. lyellii is still cultivated here. Dr. King, Superintendent of the Garden who has been here many years never knew it being tried prior to his. It will not grow here. This is true of the other forms you mention also. Indeed the only one which grows freely here is the one which is found spontaneously growing in the Ganges and Brahmaputra delta, R. involucrata.*

*Mr. Duthie has far greater opportunity of getting roses of India than we but still we can get some and I have great pleasure in sending you by this post one which I hope maybe of interest to you. It has been sent to me by General Collett C.B. who commands one of the Brigades of the Army in Burma. He has collected it in the Shan Hills - between Burma proper and Siam - and describes it as a magnificent plant with pure white flowers 5 inches in diameter the plant sprawling over rocks and trees.*

*I have not attempted to do more than to reassure myself that it has not been hitherto described by an Indian author. General Collett himself in his list calls it 'my new rose' - R. gigantea, and asks if I think it new.*

*I have told him that I am sending his specimens direct to you so that he may have the verdict of the greatest authority on his rose. As I learn from your papers that you have the Yunnan specimens of Franchet and Savatier at your disposal and that you have described at least one new species from that region I will not be surprised to hear that you have already got it, but if you have not I would be very much obliged if you could let his name stand, if the name 'gigantea' is not already foreclosed, or if 'gigantea' be an inadmissible name, if you will call it after General Collett. He is one*

*of our most skilful generals and what I daresay you will agree with me in thinking is of much greater moment one of our most ardent field botanists.*

*I shall hope to hear from you at your convenience about General Collett's Rose and shall promise myself the pleasure of writing to you again when I will send you other specimens of roses.*

*At present owing to the absence of Dr. King, the whole of the work of the gardens as well as of the herbarium fall upon me, and the work of a large garden in a climate where growth is so rapid as is this, is no easy task.*

*With very kind regards,*

*Believe me*

*Sincerely Yours,*

*David Prain*

- - - - -

**Royal Rotanic Garden**

*Shibpur, Near Calcutta*

*Dear Mr. Crépin,*

*I enclosed General Collett's replies to your queries regarding Rosa gigantea Collett . The general is, I believe, trying to bring away some samples with him.*

*Since I wrote to you last I have learned a very curious fact concerning Rosa involucrata. I may have told you that it is less common in, that is to say in the delta of the Ganges and Brahmaputra than it is in Sylhet*

*which is drained by the Megna, a smaller but still considerable river of the same distributionary character. The Sylhet plains are less populous than those of Lower Bengal, the people depend largely for their food supply upon fishing the creeks and tributaries, and distributaries of the main river are not confined to their beds by means of 'bunds' (the Indian term for embankments to keep out water). So that when the river is above its cold weather level, it and more or less all of its branches, overflow the adjacent plain at many points. So much so indeed the month of June, and from then on to the month of October, the plain is a series of Jheels (that is, 'lakes' which dry up during the weather) and travellers whose only conveyance during the rains is by boat, do not keep to the main river or to its branches except in a very general way, but escape from these to the jheels, where the water can always be found from 3 to 5 feet deep, deep enough for the draught of Indian country boats in this way often saving space by using as their slack the chord of a wide bend of the river, and saving time by avoiding the force of the current.*

*The chief of the Post Office in the province of Oudh - R. Rose Esq.- an ardent gardener himself, visited these gardens last week and told me that a year ago he was ordered to go down to Dacca in East Bengal to have charge of the postal arrangements for this postal province (which includes Sylhet) for some time. While there, his duties took him on a journey such as I have described, and he found when sailing through these jheels that from end to end of the province they were full of a wild rose, hitherto unknown to him, which had no leaves upon it and was in full fruit only the fruits being above the water. This fact he had mentioned on returning to Lucknow to his friends there who said it could not be a rose at all, but he had brought seeds away with him; some of which germinated and thrived quite well till the ensuing hot weather (that is, April) when all died one by one within a month.*

*This account is that of a very observant man, and it supplies at one moment an explanation to all the difficulties I have had in considering the habits of this rose.*

*It shows by direct experiment why the North West of India botanists have given no account of Rosa involucrata. It could not grow with them and they therefore could not see it alive.*

*It explains why at this season when other tropical plants with hardly an exception is in full foliage or renews its foliage in the rains this Rose loses its leaves as I told you, at the outbreak of these (this year just a little earlier but then the rains were this year delayed) and remains bare and unsightly all through the rains. I counted the leaves on the bush I am watching on your account the other day and it did not have 5 leaves altogether, having about 30 branches. Hitherto we have not grown any of this rose in water. This we will now proceed to do. Some of our lakes are not connected with the river. These therefore are deeper by 3 or 4 feet in the rains than in the cold weather. I shall have some plants put in at the water's edge when the lake is low this will pretty nearly correspond to its natural habitat - then it may bear fruits. Mr. Rose's account hardly affords an explanation of why it does not fruit freely here but it gives the hint as to an experiment which may explain this.*

*With kind regards,*

*Yours sincerely*

*David Prain*

A perusal of the above two letters establishes clearly that *R. clinophylla* was in fact growing like the lotus a hundred years back in many

areas of Bengal though it is now confined to a few localities because of human pressure. But more important is the unique habitat described, of a rose which grows in the water with only the fruits visible above the water surface during the monsoon period.

Hybridizing with such a rose as one parent could possibly lead to roses entering the field of water gardening - an intriguing possibility first mentioned by the well known rosarian, Peter Harkness.

In order to confirm the possibility of growing *R. clinophylla* in water a small scale experiment was started in Kodaikanal using not *R. clinophylla* of which the plants available are too few to be risked, but some hybrid seedlings of *clinophylla* crossed with the closely related species, *R. bracteata*. Plants grown in bags and pots were immersed in a cement tank in my house with only the top of the stems above the water level. In nearly six months all the plants have successfully adapted to this environment and one in fact has flowered. As could be expected, since the experiment has been done with species hybrids among which there is variation, some of the plants look happier than the others while it is too early to be categorical it can be said that the experiment indicates the possibility of ultimately raising rose hybrids which grow in water or at least hybrids well adapted to water logged conditions.





## Copies of the original

Indian Rose Annual 1998

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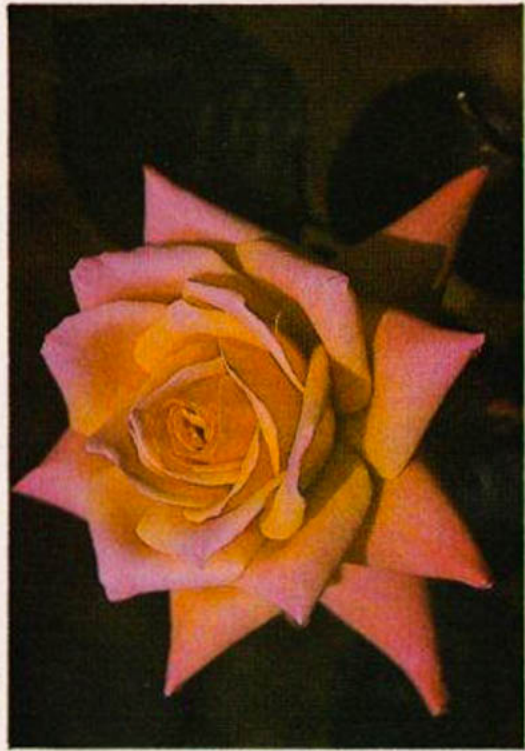
M.S. Viraraghavan

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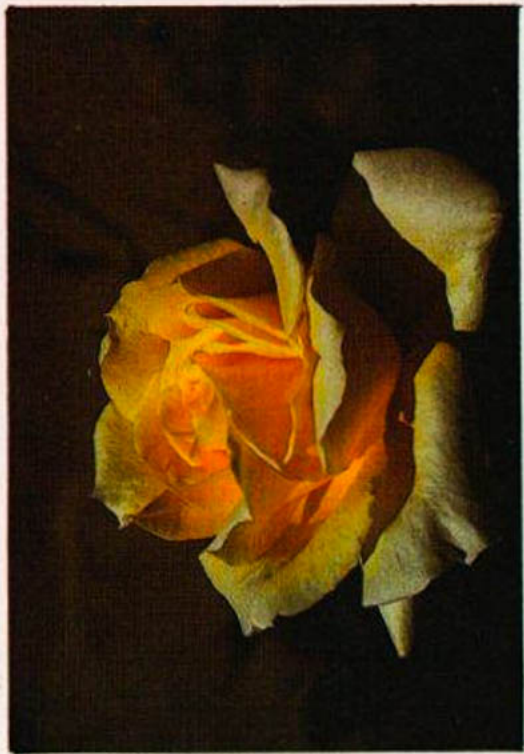
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H.T. seedling from cross Fergie x (First Prize x Valencia)  
M.S. Viraraghavan



The first H.T. seedling to appear in the new *R. clinophylla* strain,  
bred from *Landora* x (*Montezuma* x (*Little Darling* x  
[*R. clinophylla* x *R. bracteata*]))  
M.S. Viraraghavan

Royal Botanic Garden  
Seebpore  
Near Calcutta  
June 2 1888

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Director du  
Jardin Botanique de l'Etat  
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